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The Big Deal About Rich People

By Yanki Tauber

One of the most important figures in Jewish history was the compiler of the Mishnah, Rabbi Judah HaNassi, who is credited for single-handedly "preventing the Torah from being forgotten from Israel." It is a sign of his greatness that throughout the Talmud and Jewish literature he is called simply "Rabbi" ("Our Master").

The Talmud makes an interesting statement about him -- a statement that has provoked much discussion and no small amount of wonderment through the ages. It tells us that "Rabbi honored the rich." Now why would a person like Rabbi Judah HaNassi honor someone simply because he or she has amassed a large quantity of money and material possessions?

Perhaps Rabbi headed a yeshivah or some other not-for-profit organization which was reliant on contributions by people of means to accomplish its holy goals? But Rabbi Judah was himself one of the richest individuals of his time; we are told that his wealth rivaled that of his contemporary and friend, the Roman emperor Antoninus. One can assume that he had no great need for honorees to chair his annual dinners or people his executive boards.

Maybe he was awed by wealth and the pleasures it can buy? (Poor people assume that only the poor worship money, but wealthy people know that this can be equally, if not more so, the case with the rich). But the Talmud tells us that before his passing Rabbi Judah HaNassi lifted his hands up toward the heavens and proclaimed: "My ten fingers are my witnesses that I did not derive even a pinky's worth of pleasure from the material world." To Rabbi, material things held no value or desirability unto themselves: they were but means toward a higher end.

So why did Rabbi honor the rich?

On one occasion, the Lubavitcher Rebbe offered the following explanation:

The Creator of all souls has given each one of them a mission to accomplish in course of its physical life. G-d also equips each soul with all the material resources it requires to accomplish its mission. Certain missions require only a minimal amount of material resources to carry out; that's why we have poor people. Certain missions require large bank accounts to pull off; hence the rich.

The Creator has also granted the human being freedom of choice, which means that every empowerment we are given carries a certain degree of risk. We can use our resources to accomplish our mission, or we can use them to sabotage it, and even sabotage the good that other souls are trying to achieve.

What all this means is that the big-money jobs are also the more risky investments. Here G-d is taking a much bigger chance: if the person doesn't use the resources he or she have been given in the proper way, s/he can cause lots of damage. G-d is obviously going to be very selective about the souls to which He entrusts these particular missions. He is aware that they will be able to make a real mess of things; but He believes that they can do it right.

That is why, concluded the Rebbe, Rabbi Judah HaNassi honored the rich. He felt that if G-d has shown such a degree of trust in them, they have earned our respect.

BY YANKI TAUBER

By Yanki Tauber; based on the teachings of the Rebbe.

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